

# MELITENSIA

THE MALTA STUDY CENTER AT THE HILL MUSEUM & MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY

WINTER/SPRING 2007

*The Latin word Melitensia denotes "things pertaining to Malta," and it is most frequently used in the world of rare books and manuscripts to describe written collections of the history and culture of the island of Malta.*

*This newsletter reports the activities of the Malta Study Center, and features information about the history of the Knights of Malta and the history and culture of the country of Malta itself.*

*We welcome your comments and your communication about others who might share an interest in this core program of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library.*

## The Virgin and the Turk

Theresa M. Vann

The old parish church of Msida, Malta, is tucked under a cliff bordering a low-lying area. The church consists of a façade fronting a nave hewn out of the cliff rock. The humble architecture and obscure location commemorates an event that occurred long before the construction of Valletta's mighty fortifications, or even before the village of Msida came into existence. Originally, the church faced an inlet of Marsamxett harbor that was filled in during the 20th century. Fishermen habitually landed their catch there and stored the fish in a nearby pool. Sometime, in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, a Turkish raiding party attacked a group of fishermen cleaning their catch. The fishermen fled to a nearby chapel in the rock cliffs surrounding the inlet, with the Turks in hot pursuit. As they ran, the fishermen called upon the Virgin Mary to aid them. Just when it seemed that the fishermen faced death or worse, the Virgin herself appeared to the Turks and frightened them off. The grateful community built a church on the spot to commemorate the event.

The story of the Virgin and the Turk is one that historians encounter many times and in many places. Most stories of supernatural intervention are legends that cannot be verified. But what do historians do with *eyewitness* accounts of battles in which the Virgin appears at the moment of crisis to protect one side? Should historians ignore these sources

completely; discredit the chroniclers who tell the stories; explain the stories as the misinterpretation of natural phenomena; or accept them as a true supernatural event recorded by the chronicler? Most historians are interpreters or explainers. Others ignore the story, while a few accept the physicality of divine apparitions. On rare occasions, the medieval historian can chart the development of a battle-field miracle from a vague rumor to a full-figure apparition. The history of the Order of the Hospital provides us with a fine example. When the Ottoman armies of Mehmet the Conqueror besieged the Knights of the Hospital in the city of Rhodes in 1480, the Ottomans withdrew after pulverizing the city for two months. One of the reasons Turkish prisoners offered for lifting the siege was an apparition of the Virgin over the walls of the city during a decisive battle.

There are five contemporary Christian narratives of the event, three by eyewitnesses and two written soon after the event drawing on eyewitness accounts. The three eyewitness accounts were published in 1480: Guillaume Caoursin, the vicechancellor of the Order, who wrote the official history of the siege; Pierre d'Aubusson, the master of the Order, who wrote the official letter reporting the Hospitaller's victory to the pope and to the Holy Roman

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The former parish church in Msida, Malta, site of the apparition  
(Photo: Theresa Vann)



The fish tank, rebuilt as a wash house in the early 18th century  
(Photo: Theresa Vann)



The interior of the wash house, which still contains water (Photo: Theresa Vann)

*For local information about Msida, see Charles Frott, Towns and Villages in Malta and Gozo: Part I, The Twin Harbor Area (Rabat, Malta, 1994), especially pages 63-64.*

Emperor; and Jacobo de Curte, an Italian Augustinian friar, who dedicated his account to his brother. The two later works are by Amarys Dupuis, a French hospitaller who arrived in Rhodes soon after the siege and published a French account in 1481, and John Kay, who published an English translation of Caoursin in 1483. Of the five accounts, only one, Curte's, was not influenced by Caoursin.

Rumors of the Virgin's appearance begin with Caoursin, who recounts the testimony of Turkish prisoners in the aftermath of the siege. Just at the climactic moment when it seemed the Turks were about to take the city, the Knights unfurled the Order's banner showing the cross, the Virgin, and John the Baptist. Under later interrogation, the Turkish prisoners said they retreated because at that moment they thought they saw, not a banner, but an actual cross, surrounded by a shining woman in white and a man in peasant garb. Caoursin repeats the story as a perception of the Turks; neither of the other two eyewitness accounts by d'Aubusson (which Caoursin probably composed) and Curte repeats the story. However, all three eyewitnesses attribute the Knights' victory to divine intervention in human affairs, secured by the prayers of the Christians of Rhodes.

Caoursin's history formed the basis for later accounts that embellished this one particular story. Amarys Dupuis, whose account incorporates Caoursin's with the reports of other eyewitnesses, tells the story as a chivalric "battle of the standards" that sanctifies the Knights' banner. The Turks had captured one Hospitaller banner when they saw the apparition of the Virgin, the cross, and John the Baptist. At the same time, the Christians saw a vision of a cross surmounting the Turkish camp, which inspired them to fight on and capture the Sultan's banner. John Kay's English translation, printed in 1483, further elaborated the story and interpreted it for the reader. Kay describes the capture of three Hospitaller banners, whereupon the Virgin, Christ, and St. John appear with a whole heavenly host to fight the Turks. The Turks consult among themselves and decide to withdraw before this marvelous sight. Kay has no doubt that the episode confirmed the miraculous nature of the Christian victory at Rhodes.

Eyewitness testimony is not always reliable. But in this instance none of the western eyewitnesses report seeing an apparition. Later historians garbled the story and incorporated a familiar theme, that of the Virgin personally coming to the defense of Christians besieged by non Christians. The story is told as an historical event attributed to different localities in Western Europe. The origin appears to be the report of ninth-century vision of the Virgin spreading her veil over Constantinople to defend it from pagan Slavs. Eastern Christians attributed similar protective powers to icons of the Virgin, which, when carried in procession or publicly venerated (as happened during the siege of Rhodes) had the same power to physically repel the enemy of Christians. These stories symbolize divine favor for the winner and the triumph of Christianity.

So, upon investigation, the story becomes less fantastic and more contextualized. Perhaps something similar would happen if we knew more about the Virgin in Msida. Or maybe not; without an eyewitness, we'll never know for sure.

## Wignacourt Museum, Rabat

**Collections:** St. Paul's Grotto (Crypta S. Pauli); St. Paul's Parish Church, Rabat; St. Paul's Grotto Collegiate Chapter, Archives of the Collegiate Church of St. Paul, Rabat.

The archives of the Wignacourt Museum record the history of St. Paul's Grotto, a unique religious site located in Rabat, Malta. According to tradition, Paul was imprisoned in the grotto after being shipwrecked on the island of Malta. During Paul's lifetime, the grotto was located outside the walls of the Roman city of Melite, in an area riddled with catacombs. It was a devotional site by the fourteenth century, and a chapel stood there. By the sixteenth century, chips of stone from the grotto were considered to have the ability to cure snakebite. Pilgrims were permitted to harvest the stone, since it was believed that the Grotto miraculously regenerated new stone. The modern cult centered on the site, however, owes much to the devotion of Juan Benaguas, a wealthy Spaniard who lived in the grotto as a hermit. Benaguas received authority over the grotto from the parish in 1610, and then transferred it to the Order of the Hospital in 1617. Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt raised the grotto to the status of a collegiate church and established a college of chaplains of the Order of St. John to officiate at the grotto. Wignacourt built a baroque convent for the college, which was connected to the Grotto by an underground passage.

Today, the Wignacourt Museum is one of three buildings (the other two are St. Paul's parish church and



The interior of St. Paul's Grotto, with the statue of St. Paul. (Photo: Theresa Vann)

the adjoining chapel of St. Publius) built over the St. Paul's Grotto complex. The present church of St. Paul and chapel of St. Publius were built between 1575-1578, then rebuilt after the 1693 earthquake according to the designs of Lorenzo Gafa. The Wignacourt Museum is housed in the Wignacourt College, named for its founder, Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt.

The Wignacourt Museum contains the archives of the College of Chaplains of the Order of St. John; the parish archives of St. Paul's Grotto Parish Church; and numerous other manuscripts, books, music collections, and ephemera relating to the history of these institutions. The Malta Study Center microfilming project, under the direction of Msgr. John Azzopardi, microfilmed sections of the archives. This microfilm will soon be available in digital

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format. Some portions of the collection, which includes music and rare books, have not been microfilmed or digitized. These await preservation.

Bibliography: John Azzopardi, ed., *St. Paul's Grotto, Church and Museum at Rabat, Malta* (Rabat: Friends of the Cathedral Museum, Rabat—Malta, 1990).

The Cathedral Museum  
Microfilming project filmed 173 manuscripts and 3 printed works.

Index of microfilmed archives:  
• Acta originalia curiae provicariialis civitatis notabilis (1 ms) 1823-1825

- Confraternitates (2 mss) 1699-1782
- Conti (Introito ed Esito) (88 mss) 1635-1922
- Decime (1 ms) 1583-1586
- Deliberazioni (4 mss) 1782-1961
- Documenti e lettere (10 mss) 1641-1943
- Dottor Giac° Marchese (1 ms) 1408-1847
- Esigenziale (4 mss) 1764-1885
- Fabrica (3 mss) 1682-1852
- Inventario (2 mss) 1756-1855
- Lampade della parrocchiale chiesa (1 ms) 1616-1820
- Libro d'annotazioni apparententi al collegio (1 ms) 1705-1735
- Miscellanea (12 mss) 1551-1907
- Plans, sketches, and estimates for St. Paul's Anglican cathedral (1 ms) 1841-1844
- Status animarum (5 mss) 1770-1849

Parish Records of St. Paul's Grotto Church, Rabat, 1902-1966  
Baptisms 1902-1961 (10 mss)  
Confirmations 1941-1966 (1 ms)  
Marriages 1902-1961 (7 mss)  
Deaths 1902-1925 (3 mss)

Printed book from the Wignacourt Collection (in need of preservation; not yet microfilmed or digitized)  
(Photo: Theresa Vann)



## ACTIVITIES OF THE CURATOR

In October 2006, Dr. Theresa M. Vann, the Joseph S. Micallef curator of the Malta Study Center, taught the two-week course LIS 2511, "Managing Electronic Records" for the department of Library and Information Studies at the University of Malta. The class consisted of two weeks of lectures, plus a group project that the students completed after Vann returned to the United States. The intrepid class analyzed the digitization of the

Banca Giuratale of the National Archives of Malta, and produced a full report on the scope of the project, strategy for completion, metadata, and workflow.

Dr. Vann published two articles:

"The exchange of information and money between the Hospitallers of Rhodes and their European priories in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries," in *International mobility in the*

*military orders (twelfth to fifteenth centuries): travelling on Christ's business*, edited by Jochen Burgtorf and Helen Nicholson (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006).

"The Archives and Library of the Sacra Infermeria, Malta" in *The Medieval Hospital and Medical Practice*, Avista Studies in the History of Medieval Technology, Science and Art, Ashgate, 2007.

## Conference Sessions about the Order of the Temple

2007 is the 700th anniversary year of the arrest of the Templars and the beginning of the trial of the order, initially in France and subsequently throughout Catholic Christendom. The trial of the Templars not only stimulates debate among specialist scholars but is also a subject for interest among the wider public, most recently through Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code*.

An international group of scholars are assembling at the International Medieval Congresses in Leeds and Kalamazoo to examine various themes connected with the trial. The organizers of the panels are Jochen Burgtorf, Paul Crawford, and Helen J. Nicholson. The Malta Study Center is sponsoring four of the panels, two at Leeds and two at Kalamazoo.

Sessions at the International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan, May 10th-13th, 2007.

Friday, May 11,

### **The Trial of the Templars, 1307-2007 I**

(Co-sponsored with the Department of History, California State University-Fullerton)

Organizer: Jochen Burgtorf, California State Univ.-Fullerton  
 Presider: Helen J. Nicholson, Cardiff Univ.

### **The Inventories of the Templars' Houses in France**

Jochen Burgtorf

### **The Tribunals in France: King Philip IV and the Bishops**

Dale R. Streeter, Missouri State Univ.

### **The Trial Depositions as Evidence for Kinship Influence in the Order of the Temple**

Jochen G. Schenk, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies  
**Hospitaller Assimilation of Templar Properties**

Theresa M. Vann, Hill Museum & Manuscript Library

### **The Trial of the Templars, 1307-2007 II**

Organizer: Jochen Burgtorf, California State Univ.-Fullerton  
 Presider: Paul Crawford, California Univ. of Pennsylvania

### **The Trial of the Templars in Ireland**

Helen J. Nicholson, Cardiff Univ.  
**King Edward II of England and the Templars**

Jeffrey S. Hamilton, Baylor Univ.  
**The Testimonies of Non-Templar Witnesses in the Iberian Peninsula**

Josep-Maria Sans i Trave, Independent Scholar

### **Reassessing the Dissolution of the Templars: King Dinis and Their Suppression in Portugal**

Clive Porro, Queen Mary, Univ. of London

Sessions at the International Congress on Medieval Studies, University of Leeds, Leeds, United Kingdom, July 9th-12th, 2007.

Wednesday, July 11

### **The Trial of the Templars, 1307-2007, VI: The Trial in Italy and the Mediterranean**

Organizer Helen J. Nicholson  
 Moderator/Chair Anne Gilmour-Bryson, Department of History, University of Melbourne Trinity Western University, Canada

### **The Templars and their Trial in Sicily**

Kristjan Toomaspoeg, Università degli Studi di Lecce

### **Rinaldo da Concorezzo and the Trial of the Templars in North Italy**

Elena Bellomo, Department of History, Rutgers University, New Jersey

### **On the Presence of the Templars in Byzantine and Latin-Dominated Greece in the Early 13th-Early 14th Centuries**

Alexios Savvides, Aegean University, Rhodes

### **The Trial of the Templars, 1307-2007, VIII: The Trial and its Aftermath (ii)**

Organiser and Presider: Helen J. Nicholson

### **The Trial of the Templars in the County of Flanders and the Transfer of their Possessions to the Knights Hospitaller**

Filip Hooghe, Independent Scholar, Antwerp

### **The Commanderies of the Templars in the Polish Lands and their History after the End of the Order**

Maria Starnawska, Institute of History, Akademia Podlaska, Siedlce

### **'The Templars Are Everywhere': An Examination of the Myths behind Templar Survival after 1307**

John Walker, Victoria County History, East Riding of Yorkshire, University of Hull

## Third Milestone Reached for \$2.25 Million NEH Challenge

Last summer, HMML exceeded the \$600,000 third-year fundraising goal set by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) in a Challenge Grant to raise \$2.25 million that will endow the Malta Study Center. As part of a four-year fundraising effort that began in 2003, the NEH provides a \$1 match for every \$4 raised by HMML for the Center. To be eligible for the matching dollars, HMML must meet the fundraising goals for each year set by the NEH. August 1, 2006 began the final fundraising year of the grant in which \$450,000 must be raised. The endowment will establish a permanent curator and fund a full complement of activities including digital preservation of valuable documents, cataloguing, research, book acquisition, fellowships and conferences.

To make a matching gift, visit our website or contact HMML Development Director, Erin Loneragan, 320-363-2095, or [elonergan@csbsju.edu](mailto:elonergan@csbsju.edu).

## More Digitized Manuscripts Arrive from the Priory of Rome

Digitization continues at the Magistral Palace Library of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, in Rome. HMML has received fifty-seven proofs of nobility from the Alberi Genealogici series, dating from the 17th and 18th century, and volumes dating from 1939-1993 of the *Rivista illustrata* (or *Rivista mensile illustrata*), published after 1988 as the *Bulletin Officiel de l'Ordre Souverain Militaire et Hospitalier de Saint Jean de*

*Jérusalem, de Rhodes et de Malte*. Some other manuscripts are:

- E. Amelin, *Catalogue de l'Ordre de St. Jean de Jerusalem, de la Vénérable Langue de Provence, des Prieurès de St. Gilles et Toulouse*, 3 volumes, 19th century French volume manuscript containing proofs of nobility;
- F MAL 130.2 DIS, *Disegni della Guerra, Assedio et Assalti Dati dall'Armata Turchesca all'Isola di Malta l'Anno MDLXV*. Italian, 17th Century
- MS 1478, *Frater Johannes Vulpis, [Copie in extenso des établissements définis lors des chapitres généraux de l'Ordre des Hospitaliers de Saint Jean de Jérusalem]*, French; Latin, 14th/15th Century
- MS 285, *Noms et Blasons de tous Les grands maitres de l'Ordre de saint Jean de Jerusalem*. French. Date unknown.
- MS 31, *Instruzione a Fracapellani Gerosolimitani per Poter con Facilità Regolare le Conscienze di Tutt'I Cavalieri, ed Altre Persone Sogette al Sac'Ordine Gerosolimitano....* Italian, 17th Century.
- MS 95, *L'Ordine che si tiene nel darla Croce, emetter l'Abilo di San Giovanne Gerosolimitano, e professar li Fraccapellani*. Italian. Date unknown.
- MS 98, *Ceremoniale, Che si deve osservare nell'armare I Cavellieri, e dar l'Abilo del'Ordine di San Giovanni Gerosolimitano*. Italian. Date Unknown.

## Recent Acquisitions

## Books

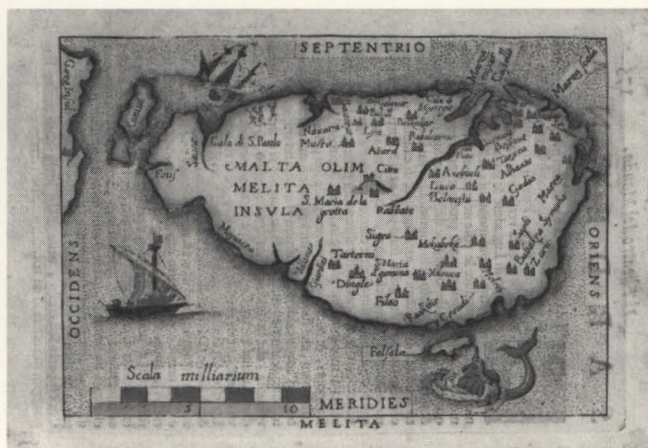


*Statuta Hospitalis Hierusalem* (Rome, 1588). This printed volume of the Statutes of the Order is notable for its fine illustrations. It was commissioned by Jean Baptiste Rondinelli, the Order's ambassador to the Papal Court. The Malta Study Center had microfilmed another copy of this volume, which, unfortunately, had suffered severely from bookworms. The Center is very happy to acquire a copy for the collection.

## Works on Paper - Maps



The Islands of Malta and Gozo. Detail from Sebastian Münster, *Cosmographia universalis*, ca. 1550. Hand-colored inset map from a German edition of Münster's work on geography.



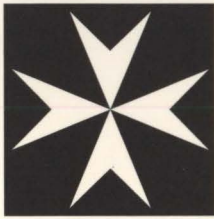
Map of the island of Malta, from Abraham Ortelius, *Epitome* (Venice: G. M. Turrini, 1655) From an Italian pirate edition, with color added later. This beautiful little map shows the villages of Malta, but not the city of Valletta (built after 1565).

## Publications Received

*St. Paul's Grotto and the Pauline cult, 1600-1624* : Pope Paul V, Juan Benegas de Cordova, and Grand Master Adolph de Wignacourt , edited by John Azzopardi. Rabat, Malta: Wignacourt Museum, 2006. (Gift of the editor)

*The cult of St. Paul in the Christian churches and in the Maltese tradition: acts of the international symposium, 26-27 June, 2006*, edited by John Azzopardi. Rabat, Malta: Wignacourt Museum, 2006. (Gift of the editor)

Nikolas Jaspert, "La reforma agustiniana: un movimiento europea entre «piedad popular» y «política eclesiástica» in *XXXII Semana de Estudios Medievales Estella, 18 a 22 de Julio de 2005* (Pamplona, 2006): 375-420. (Gift of the author)



THE MALTA STUDY CENTER  
HILL MUSEUM & MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY  
SAINT JOHN'S UNIVERSITY  
Collegeville, Minnesota 56321-7300

(320) 363-3514  
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